

# DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

## Communicable Disease Control

# Hepatitis A

(infectious hepatitis)

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### What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A (formerly known as infectious hepatitis) is a liver disease caused by a virus. The disease is fairly common; 50-100 cases are reported in Montana each year.

### Who gets hepatitis A?

Anyone can get hepatitis A, but it occurs more frequently in children.

### How is the virus spread?

The hepatitis A virus enters through the mouth, multiplies in the body and is passed in the feces. The virus can then be carried on an infected person's hands and can be spread by direct contact, or by consuming food or drink that has been handled by the individual. In some cases, it can be spread by consuming water contaminated with improperly treated sewage.

### What are the symptoms of hepatitis A?

The symptoms of hepatitis A may include fatigue, poor appetite, fever and nausea. Urine may become darker in color, and then jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes) may appear. The disease is rarely fatal and most people recover in a few weeks without any complications. Infants and young children tend to have very mild symptoms and are less likely to develop jaundice than are older children and adults. Not everyone who is infected will have all of the symptoms.

### How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear two to six weeks after exposure, but usually within four weeks.

### For how long is an infected person able to spread the virus?

The contagious period begins about two weeks before the symptoms appear and extends to a few days after jaundice appears.

### Does past infection with hepatitis A make a person immune?

Once an individual recovers from hepatitis A, he or she is immune for life and is no longer contagious.

### What is the treatment for hepatitis A?

There are no special medicines or antibiotics that can be used to treat a person once the symptoms appear. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed.

### How can hepatitis A be prevented?

The single most effective way to prevent spread is careful hand washing after using the toilet or every diaper change. Also, infected people should not handle foods during the contagious period. Household members or others in close contact with an infected person should call a doctor or the health department to obtain a shot of immune globulin which minimizes their chances of becoming ill. A vaccine for Hepatitis A is also available and recommended for individuals who are at highest risk. See your health care provider for more information.